

Train Like a Pro; Are we hurting our kids?

by Coach Dave

Coaches Corner

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By Dave Gleason

There is a malady that is running a muck in the hyper competitive world of youth sports. The well intentioned and yet ill conceived notion of "more is better" that modern society places on young athletes in an effort to be at the top of their game is not getting the results that were intended.

Parents, trainers, coaches are involving children in more specialized programs adding to over scheduled youngsters that are improving marginally, getting burnt out and suffering from over use injuries. The result is an increase in non trauma related injuries due in part to a lack of fundamental skill development.

According to the NCAA an average of only 0.16% of all High School Athletes ascend to play in the professional ranks. With these kind of odds, one would think the primary focus of activity for our young athletes would be that of overall development and fun.

Student-Athletes	Men's Basketball	Women's Basketball	Football	Baseball	Men's Ice Hockey	Men's Soccer
High School Student Athletes	540,207	439,550	1,109,278	472,644	36,475	391,839
High School Senior Student Athletes	154,345	125,586	316,937	135,041	10,421	111,954
NCAA Student Athletes	17,008	15,423	66,313	30,365	3,945	21,770
NCAA Freshman Roster Positions	4,859	4,407	18,947	8,676	1,127	6,220
NCAA Senior Student Athletes	3,780	3,427	14,736	6,748	877	4,838
NCAA Student Athletes Drafted	44	32	250	600	33	76
Percent High School to NCAA	3.1%	3.5%	6.0%	6.4%	10.8%	5.6%
Percent NCAA to Professional	1.2%	0.9%	1.7%	8.9%	3.8%	1.6%
Percent High School to Professional	0.03%	0.03%	0.08%	0.44%	0.32%	0.07%

Source: National Collegiate Athletic Association

What is in the best interest of your young athlete is to take a snap shot of an average day or week in its totality. 6 to 7 hours of school followed by 1 and sometimes 2 separate sporting practices, homework and then off to bed all to be repeated is not uncommon. Add in lack of sleep, poor nutrition and no social outlet and this example paints a very scary picture.

Yes society has changed. Yes there is a lack of free play and more emphasis on academics. Yes there is a shift from recreational sports to high pressure select and travels teams. There is one constant: Kids are still developing, constantly changing human beings and should be dealt with accordingly.

So what is a parent to do?

1.) Slow and safe before fast and fancy. Beware of any program, team or skills clinic that does not have at its base a well rounded variety of fundamental skill development. The younger the athlete, the more basic the activities should be with even more emphasis on encouragement and fun.

2.) Be age appropriate. Look for programs that treat your young athletes right. 6-9 year olds should be exposed to outcome based coaching. This type of coaching is rooted in encouragement while allowing the young athlete to discover movement or sports skills. 10-13 year olds should be introduced to outcome based coaching as well with about 25% more actual coaching of skill sets with simple instructions. Young athletes ages 14 and up should be coached with more emphasis on skill development with injury prevention and long term success and the primary goals.

3.) Cut it out. 3-4 soccer games in one day is excessive. Practices 6 days per week for 2-3 separate sports teams is a very real scenario and should be avoided. A young athlete in this situation engages in more structured practices that professional athletes and they are headed injury. Reduce an over loaded schedule to allow for rest, recovery and time to just be a kid.

4.) Think long term. Over specializing and over scheduling will place a premature cap on achievement as well as cause over use injuries. Developing even the best of young athletes takes time and no short cuts can be taken. Allow and encourage playing several sports to minimize repetitive motion injuries and over compensation

Let's use our education system as an analogy. A child who seems to have a knack for mathematics would not be encouraged to drop other subjects and only concentrate on math. Once more, having great success in mathematics in 1st grade would not result in skipping grades 2-6 to engage in 7th grade algebra. Skipping steps will only result in a lack of ability and an increase in the risk of injury.

When in doubt think of moderation and variety with as much time for un-coached play time as possible. No matter the age...play and fun is a great way to stay active. As stated above if the odds of "going pro" are limited so make sure you think of your child someday being in his/her 40's with kids and still loving exercise. Dave Gleason is owner of Athletic Revolution on Winter Street, co-author of Youth Speed Development as well as the International Youth Conditioning Association Trainer of the Year. Coach Dave consults fitness trainers from around the world how to effectively train young athletes for long term success.